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Limit Soviet bloc travel, FBI urges

By Bill Gertz
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An increasing number of Soviet bloc spies, disguised as students and tourists, are supplying valuable information to communists that Soviet diplomats don't have access to because of travel restrictions, FBI Director William H. Webster told a Senate panel yesterday.

"It is time the public clearly understands the extent to which the Soviets and their surrogates . . . conduct business in our nation," Mr. Webster testified before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

Subcommittee Chairman William V. Roth Jr., Delaware Republican, called the hearing to examine possible amendments to the Foreign Missions Act that would curb Soviet spying.

The subcommittee plans to explore whether the Foreign Missions Act should be expanded to include tougher restrictions on Soviet-allied diplomats and foreign-owned companies in the United States that operate as fronts for the Soviets, he said.

Under current U.S. law, Soviet diplomatic personnel cannot travel outside of a 25-mile radius from Washington, New York and San Francisco, but East bloc diplomats can travel anywhere in the country, Mr. Webster said.

"The threat comes not only from Soviet and bloc officials in the United States, but from trade representatives, correspondents, students, scholars, scientists and tourists," he said.

He estimated that there are 4,000

diplomats and commercial officials from "communist countries" currently in the United States. The Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries account for 2,500 of those and "one-third of these officials are affiliated with intelligence services," he said.

Besides diplomats, there are 15,000 Soviet bloc students and 90,000 visitors from the Soviet bloc each year whose travel provides a cover for spying, Mr. Webster said.

There were about 65 foreign-owned companies in the United States used as cover by Soviet bloc intelligence services, Mr. Webster said. The most damaging American espionage cases have occurred under the cover of Soviet bloc trading companies, he said.

It would be "helpful" to the FBI if the administration imposed equal travel restrictions on Soviet and East bloc personnel, he said.

"They largely have the run of the country," Mr. Webster said of East bloc spies.

"Competing interests" within the government have opposed extending the travel ban because it may impede U.S. commercial and diplomatic efforts, he said.

Intelligence experts assert that the United States relies heavily on its diplomatic posts in East Europe for its clandestine collection efforts and any curbs here may lead to further restrictions behind the Iron Curtain.

Regarding the recent defection of former CIA operative Edward L. Howard, Mr. Webster said FBI agents had planned to arrest Howard 24 hours after he disappeared last Sept. 21 in New Mexico.